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WORDS WHICH HAVE SEEN BETTER DAYS.*

BY G. L. APPERSON.

I AM sometimes inclined to think that the study of language—especially of our own noble mother-tongue—might be made more interesting, more real to pupils and students, if those who teach it grasped more fully the central fact that a language is a living organism, and that its vital processes resemble those which are constantly presented to the observation of the student of natural phenomena. A language grows by accretion, by development in some special direction, like a tree putting forth a fresh branch, or by absorption or adoption from the vocabulary of other tongues. Simultaneously with the process of growth or development, there is continually going on decay and removal. Here a word or phrase is sloughed off, so to speak; there is shed a whole group of words or terms rendered obsolete by the advance of science, by alterations in personal and in national habits and customs, and by a variety of other causes.

The one important thing to remember is, that in a *live* language change is for ever going on, and that word-history is not only the key to etymology, but also often at many points touches and illuminates knowledge of the most varied kinds. Coleridge wisely said that more knowledge of more value might sometimes be learned from the history of a word than from the history of a campaign.

Change takes many forms. Not only are some words dying out and new words being invented or developed, but many words are continually undergoing change of meaning.

In some cases the meaning becomes narrower, in many more wider, in some completely changed. A century and a half ago, a novelist was defined as "an admirer of new things or changes, a newsmonger or intelligencer." Now he is a writer of novels, and the old meaning is quite dead. In Elizabethan days a tobacconist was one who smoked, or in the then phrase, who drank tobacco; later it was applied to

* A lecture delivered before the Wimbledon branch of the P.N.E.U.

the person who sold the beneficent weed. A bibliographer was of old one who wrote books, now he is one who writes about books. I have lately had occasion to look up the history of marmalade—both the name and the thing itself; and marmalade is an interesting example of the widening process. We speak now of orange marmalade, and of lemon and other marmalades with no consciousness of absurdity. Yet, to say orange marmalade is really as absurd as to speak of red-currant apple pie. Marmalade comes from "marmelo," Portuguese for quince, and is simply quince jam or preserve. It was known under other names in the 15th century, but as marmalade it was presented to Henry VIII., who promptly, like Oliver Twist, asked for more, and from that time, *i.e.*, early in the 16th century, until near the middle of the 18th, no one understood by marmalade anything save a confection or conserve of quince pulp with sugar. A cookery book of 1736 has receipts for quince marmalade, which seems to imply that other kinds of marmalade could be made; and in another old "Collection of Receipts in Cookery, Physick and Surgery," on my own shelves, the 7th edition of which is dated 1759, I find receipts for making marmalade of oranges, quinces, apricots, and orange-flowers, which proves that the wider application of the name was then fully established.

It is by no means possible in all or even in most cases to account for the fate which befalls words and phrases. The fate of many, as of some books, seems to have been the sport of

"That shrewd and knavish sprite,
Call'd Robin Goodfellow,"

or some other irresponsible elf.

The history of a word is often singularly like that of a human being. Some words rise from a very lowly origin in the slums of slang to respectability and general use and acceptance; others, entering the language under much more favourable conditions, fall by mischance or neglect into disuse, and drag out a maimed existence in provincial or dialectal forms. In worse case even than the latter are those words which, having been for many years, perhaps for centuries, in ordinary use by the best writers, gradually sink into disrepute, and being heard only in colloquial or vulgar language, find a last resting-place in the pages of a slang dictionary.

The main purpose of this paper is to give and illustrate a few examples of the last kind of word-history; but before doing so I should like to mention one or two instances of the contrary—the upward process.

First, two words which began life in the slums of slang are “neck-tie” and “derrick.” Neck-tie is now an innocent and useful word enough, but originally was a purely cant term, ominously associated in the early part of the last century with the gallows on Tyburn hill. “Derrick” is now in perfectly reputable use as the name of the hoisting machine, the crane-like apparatus familiar on wharves and elsewhere; but its origin was somewhat ghastly, like that of “neck-tie.” The public hangman at the beginning of the 17th century was a man named Derrick. This name, as in so many other cases, was turned into a verb. William Kemp, an Elizabethan actor and writer, speaks of a rascal who would “derrick his dad.” As the next step in its development, the word became, first, a general name, like Calcraft or Ketch, for an executioner, and then a synonym for the gallows itself. Dekker writes of dancing “Derrick’s dance in a hempen halter.” From this gallows use we get the name of the lifting or hoisting machine now known all over the world as a “derrick.”

Again, Boswell tells us that Dr. Johnson when engaged in the compilation of his epoch-making “Dictionary,” rejected the word “civilization,” as opposed to barbarism, because he could find no authority for it; and when Boswell proposed “humiliating” as a good word, the doctor, while admitting that it was in common use, said that he did not know it to be good English. No one nowadays would think of questioning the claims of either “humiliating” or “civilization” to be regarded as good English. Many other words have had a like experience. A dictionary compiler of 1658 gave a collection of “barbarous words as are advised to be cautiously or not at all used,” and among such barbarisms are included the now familiar words, autograph, bibliography, and evangelize. In 1644, “contrast” was ridiculed as a new-fangled word, and was held up to scorn among a number of other new coinages as “shallow inventions,” “silly fancies,” “ridiculous” and “unnatural.” But “contrast” held its ground, while many of the other condemned words died an early and unregretted death. More familiar instances of progress in use

are “cab” and “bat.” “Bat” in the sense of one who bats at cricket—so-and-so, we say, is a good bat—is generally accepted as a perfectly admissible word. But it was originally a colloquialism—a convenient abbreviation of batter, which is now seldom heard. Older than either is “batsman,” which is still used by conscientious scribes. “Cab” is a clearer case. Seventy or eighty years ago, when the cabriolet first appeared in London streets, in succession to the old hackney-coaches, the contracted name of “cab” was slang, and nothing else. The word was unknown in polite speech. But this was soon changed. Cabriolet was altogether too fine and long for every-day use, and “cab” holds the field now as a word of unchallenged respectability. “’Bus” is in an intermediate state; but it is quite possible that in time to come “omnibus” may be as extinct as “cabriolet.” One can only devoutly hope that such abominations as “bike” and “trike” may not similarly fight their way into the recognized vocabulary.

I will give only one more instance of upward progress, and that is the interesting word “honeymoon”—a word which no one now fears to use. In one of our earliest dictionaries, Richard Huloet’s *Abcedarium*, published in 1552, there is the following quaint definition of honeymoon. “A terme proverbially applied to such as be newe married, whiche wyll not fall out at the fyrste, but th’one loveth the other at the beginnyng exceedyngly; the likely hode of theyr excedyng love appearing to aswage, ye which time the vulgar people cal the honymone.” A cynical observer might remark with some satisfaction the unanimity with which authorities appear to limit the “exceedyng love” to one short month, after which period they expect to find a slight flavour of bitterness entering into the matrimonial bliss. But, despite the cynical observer, authorities sometimes err, proverbs are not by any means invariably trustworthy guides, and even the honeymoon has been known to be prolonged through a series of years, even through a life-time. But this is by the way.

I turn now to words and phrases in the history of which the more common process of degeneration or depravation, as it may be called, has taken place. These are the words and phrases which have seen better days. There are many words which having once been standard or literary English, have slipped from one cause or another out of literary use, but still

retain a certain vogue either as provincialisms or as members of the great body of slang and colloquial expressions. These are the words which have become completely degenerate. Another section consists of those terms which have developed a downward tendency, but whose fate is not yet fixed. These are the words and phrases which are so often used colloquially and loosely in a non-natural sense, in a depraved extension and widening of their proper significations. Changes of this kind have always been taking place in the spoken language, but it is only in comparatively recent times that, owing chiefly to the hasty writing of journalists and slovenly book-makers, such depravation has proceeded at an accelerated pace, and has largely affected our written English. The loose construction, the twisted or inverted meaning, the slangy word or phrase crops up in current talk, no one knows how; it soon appears in print in hasty article, smart leader, or in slipshod fiction, and forthwith it is transferred to the columns of the latest thing in the way of big dictionaries. If after this it is challenged, reference is made to the latest dictionary; its authority shelters the new coinage or new attribution, and the vicious circle is complete.

Many words are of course misused from sheer ignorance or from simple carelessness. There was an advertisement the other day in a Croydon paper for "a young person to take the entire charge of two *elderly* children." What was intended is plain enough; but such misuse of "elderly" is lamentable. In a recent number of the *Sphere* a writer was allowed to describe something as "rather unique." A thing may be *nearly* unique, but how there can be *degrees* in uniqueness I do not understand. Occasionally writers and speakers, who should know better, are tempted to play tricks with the language, just to score some small point, or make some momentary effect. The late Mr. William Black, near the beginning of one of his shorter stories, describes a certain financier as having "rather a nasal nose." And I have been told that a learned judge not so very long ago informed a prisoner at the bar that he "merited most condign punishment," which was as much as to say that "he merited most merited punishment." Mr. Kipling's writings are by no means free from the vicious misuse of words; and writers of the "splashy" school revel in strange verbal applications. I

was reading a few days ago a posthumously published book by the late and much lamented Stephen Crane—*Wounds in the Rain*, a series of vividly imagined stories and sketches of the war in Cuba. They are very graphic, very realistic; but the author plays strange tricks with words. He speaks, just to give one instance, of the Mauser bullets from the Spanish rifles "sneering" over the heads of the American firing line. What that may mean I do not know.

Loose and inaccurate use of words in ordinary speech is so common that it is hardly necessary to give examples. The depraved application of such words as "awful" and "awfully" are almost elbowing the legitimate meanings out of countenance and out of use. To use "awful" in its proper sense is to lay oneself open, if not to misapprehension, at least to bad puns and foolish jests. What, for instance, would modern slangy talkers and depravers of words make of Keats's line in "Isabel":—

"His heart beat awfully against his side!"

But by-and-by, no doubt, "awfully" will be out of date, and some other absurdity will take its place. Ladies of the last century used "vastly" in much the same way. Plays and pictures, shows and dresses, were all "vastly" fine. "Purely" was similarly used. You will remember Austin Dobson's charming picture of Madam Placid, "a Gentlewoman of the Old School":—

"Her art was sampler-work design,
Fireworks for her were 'vastly fine,'
Her luxury was elder-wine—
She loved that 'purely.'"

But "vastly" and "purely" have both gone to the limbo to which we may hope "awfully" will also be relegated.

There are some poor words which have become so familiar to newspaper readers in their depraved significations, that they are now hardly noticed. The verb "transpire" is the best known of these. In sensational descriptions of great disasters, again, we too often read of a "holocaust" of victims in cases where fire has had no share whatever in the catastrophe described. But I need not labour this point. Such depravation of words seems to be inevitably associated with the history of language.

Again, there are unaccountable fashions in the use of certain words; and one poor term is pressed to do the work of half-a-dozen. Of late years "distinctly" has been much run upon. The critic says that the characterisation in so-and-so's new novel is "distinctly" good; while the writer of market news in a trade journal asserts that pig-iron is "distinctly" quiet. "Appreciate" and "appreciation"—especially in terms of literary criticism—"smart," and some others have been much overworked. This tendency to drag a word from its own uses and by constant application to anything and everything to make it a mere meaningless verbal label is no new thing. A writer in the *British Magazine*, of 1763, complains of the then abuse of the word "rotation." "In short," he says, "nothing is done now but by *rotation*. At the card-playing routs, instead of cutting in to a party of whist, they play the rubbers by *rotation*; a fine lady returns her visits by *rotation*; and the parson of our parish declared yesterday that preaching every week was hard duty, and therefore he, his curate, the lecturer, and now and then a friend, would for the future preach by *rotation*. . . . An oyster-woman t'other night, at the corner of White Fryars, being pressed by two or three customers at once, who were each in a hurry to be served first, very politely desired them to have patience, and she would serve them all in *rotation*. In short, sir," he concludes, "here is such a rout at present about *rotation*, that I am quite sick of it, and I hope, as it has got into such very low hands, it will soon be out of fashion."

(To be continued.)

HISTORIC LONDON : ITS TEACHING FOR THE CHILD.*

BY D. L. MAGUIRE, L.L.A.

WE want to look at the matter from the child's standpoint, and consider how it can be adapted to a child's understanding, and therefore I must ask my readers to bear with me if I write very simply, and of things with which they are already well acquainted.

Let us think out the question : has this great city of ours—have its stones, its ancient landmarks—any message for the children, carried down through the long ages? And if, through want of appreciation, or through ignorance, which is generally the cause of that want, they miss that message, will it make any difference to them? Will they be the poorer for it in heart, in mind, and in character? In the past year we have seen a great revival of patriotism and loyalty; we have learnt the meaning of the word "citizenship," and we know how the children have shared in the enthusiasm.

It seems to me that just now is the best of times for leading them to take an intelligent interest in their own city and its history. The means for this are ready at hand; an ordinary walk through some of the oldest parts of London will be the object lesson; and I have thought that it would be most helpful for our purpose to imagine such a walk, with the accompanying plan of old London to help us. Now, suppose we have promised this walk to a child, say, of 10 or 12, of course a certain amount of preparation beforehand will make all the difference; but I think a very little will be enough. Not long ago, during a history lesson, a little girl said to me, "I don't like going to see old churches like Westminster Abbey—they're so dry." However, when we had talked over our lesson (the reign of William the Conqueror), and some of the characters of that period began to seem real to her, she admitted, "I think I *would* like to see the place where Lanfranc lived."

We want to awaken an interest in the subject before starting. First, let us help the child to picture to himself the very first

* Read before the Dulwich Branch of the P.N.E.U.